



April 10, 2019

**VIA FOIAONLINE**

**U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Headquarters**

National Freedom of Information Officer

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW (2822T)

Washington, DC 20460

Phone: (202) 566-1667

**Re: Freedom of Information Act Request: Class VI injection well applications**

Dear FOIA Officer:

This is a request under the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552, as amended ("FOIA"), and the EPA regulations at 40 C.F.R. § 2.100, *et seq.* This request is sent to you because you were identified as the proper person to receive such requests. If this request should be directed at another person, please forward this request to that person.

Sierra Club is the nation's oldest grassroots organization. It has more than 3.5 million members and supporters nationwide. Sierra Club is dedicated to the protection and preservation of the natural and human environment. Sierra Club's purpose is to explore, enjoy and protect the wild places of the earth; to practice and promote the responsible use of the earth's ecosystems and resources; and to educate and enlist humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environments.

Sierra Club is a leading non-governmental organization seeking to educate and mobilize the public on issues of climate change, fossil fuel energy and clean energy. It has been conducting multiple public campaigns around these issues, including its Dirty Fuels Campaign. This request is made on behalf of that campaign, as well as the organization's long-standing interest in government accountability and transparency.

## **REQUESTED RECORDS<sup>1</sup>**

Sierra Club requests the following records in the possession, custody, or control of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ("EPA"):

1. Any documents related to Class VI injection well applications for the last 2 years.<sup>2</sup>

## **EXEMPT RECORDS**

Should you decide to invoke a FOIA exemption with regard to any of the requested records, please include in your full or partial denial letter sufficient information for the Sierra Club to appeal the denial. To comply with legal requirements, the following information must be included:

1. Basic factual material about each withheld item, including the originator, date, length, general subject matter, and location of each item; and
2. Explanations and justifications for denial, including the identification of the category within the governing statutory provision under which the document (or portion thereof) was withheld and a full explanation of how each exemption fits the withheld material.

If you determine that portions of the records requested are exempt from disclosure, we request that you segregate the exempt portions and deliver the non-exempt portions of such records to my attention at the address below within the statutory time limit. 5 U.S.C. § 552(b).

## **FORMAT OF REQUESTED RECORDS**

Under FOIA, you are obligated to provide records in a readily accessible electronic format and in the format requested. *See, e.g.*, 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(3)(B) ("In making any record available to a person under this paragraph, an agency shall provide the record in any form or format requested by the person if the record is readily reproducible by the agency in that form or format.").

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<sup>1</sup> "Records" means information of any kind, including writings (handwritten, typed, electronic or otherwise produced, reproduced or stored), letters, memoranda, correspondence, notes, applications, completed forms, studies, reports, reviews, guidance documents, policies, telephone conversations, telefaxes, emails, documents, databases, drawings, graphs, charts, photographs, minutes of meetings, electronic and magnetic recordings of meetings, and any other compilation of data from which information can be obtained. Without limitation, the records requested include records relating to the topics described below at any stage of development, whether proposed, draft, pending, interim, final or otherwise. All of the foregoing are included in this request if they are in the possession of or otherwise under the control of EPA, National Headquarters and all of its Offices, Regions and other subdivisions.

<sup>2</sup> See EPA Underground Injection Control ("UIC") program, Class VI - Wells used for Geologic Sequestration of CO<sub>2</sub>; available at <https://www.epa.gov/uic/class-vi-wells-used-geologic-sequestration-co2>.

Please provide all records in an electronic .pdf format that is text-searchable and OCR-formatted. Portfolios and embedded files within files are not readily accessible. Please do not provide the records in a single, or “batched,” .pdf file.

### **RECORD DELIVERY**

We appreciate a prompt determination on the requested records. As mandated in FOIA, we anticipate a reply within 20 working days. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(A)(i) ; 40 C.F.R. § 2.104. Please email copies of the requested records to the e-mail address below. Please deliver documents that are not available in an electronic format to the physical address below. Failure to comply within the statutory timeframe may result in Sierra Club filing an action before the relevant U.S. District Court to ensure timely receipt of the requested materials.

*Deliver electronic documents to:*

David Abell

[david.abell@sierraclub.org](mailto:david.abell@sierraclub.org)

*Deliver other documents to:*

David Abell

2101 Webster Street, Suite 1300

Oakland, CA 94612

Please send documents on a rolling basis. EPA’s search for—or deliberations concerning—certain records should not delay the production of others that EPA has already retrieved and elected to produce. *See generally* 40 C.F.R. § 2.104 (describing response deadlines).

### **FEE WAIVER REQUEST**

I respectfully request that you waive all fees in connection with this request as provided by 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l). Sierra Club is the nation’s oldest grassroots organization with more than 3.5 million members and supporters nationwide. Sierra Club is a leading non-governmental organization seeking to educate and mobilize the public on issues of environmental protection including climate change, fossil fuel energy, clean energy and clean water. Sierra Club has spent years promoting the public interest through the development of policies that protect human health and the environment, and has routinely received fee waivers under FOIA.<sup>3</sup>

FOIA was designed to provide citizens a broad right to access government records. FOIA’s basic

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<sup>3</sup> For a recent example, see FOIA Request Reference No. EPA-HQ-2017-8568 (fee letter waiver received June 28, 2017).

purpose is to “open agency action to the light of public scrutiny,” with a focus on the public’s “right to be informed about what their government is up to.” *U.S. Dep’t of Justice v. Reporters Comm. For Freedom of Press*, 489 U.S. 749, 773-74 (1989) (internal quotation and citations omitted). In order to provide public access to this information, FOIA’s fee waiver provision requires that “[d]ocuments shall be furnished without any charge or at a [reduced] charge,” if the request satisfies the standard. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii). The 1986 fee waiver amendments were designed specifically to provide non-profit organizations such as Sierra Club access to government records without the payment of fees. *Ettlinger v. FBI*, 596 F. Supp. 867, 872 (D. Mass. 1984) (fee waiver provision intended “to prevent government agencies from using high fees to discourage certain types of requesters and requests,” which are “consistently associated with requests from journalists, scholars, and non-profit public interest groups.”).

As explained below, this FOIA request satisfies the factors listed in EPA’s governing regulations for waiver or reduction of fees, as well as the requirements for a fee waiver under the FOIA statute – that “disclosure of the information is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government and is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii), *see also* 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l).

**1. The subject matter of the requested records specifically concerns identifiable “operations and activities of the government.”**

The requested records relate to EPA’s activities regarding the UIC program and Class VI injection well applications. These activities are “identifiable operations or activities of the government.” The Department of Justice Freedom of Information Act Guide expressly concedes that “in most cases records possessed by a federal agency will meet this threshold” of identifiable operations or activities of the government. There can be no question that this is such a case.

**2. The disclosure of the requested documents would be meaningfully informative and “likely to contribute to an understanding of Federal government operations or activities.”**

The FOIA Guide makes it clear that, in the Department of Justice’s view, the “likely to contribute” determination hinges in substantial part on whether the requested documents provide information that is not already in the public domain. The requested records are “likely to contribute” to an understanding of your agency’s activities and decisions because they are not otherwise in the public domain and are not accessible other than through a FOIA request. This information will facilitate meaningful public participation in the decision-making process, therefore fulfilling the requirement that the documents requested be “meaningfully informative” and “likely to contribute” to an understanding of your agency’s decision-making process with regard to EPA’s UIC program and Class VI injection well applications.

**3. The disclosure would contribute to the understanding of the public at large, as opposed to the individual understanding of the requester or a narrow segment of interested persons.**

Sierra Club has longstanding experience and expertise in the subject area of the FOIA requests, including issues related to government accountability and transparency, and the activities that properly fall within the mission of the EPA.

Sierra Club disseminates the information it receives through FOIA requests in a variety of ways, such as: analysis and distribution to the media, distribution through publication and mailing, posting on its website, emailing and list serve distribution to our members across the U.S., and via public meetings and events. Every year the Sierra Club website receives 26,298,200 unique visits and over 30 million page views; on average, the site gets 72,049 visits per day. Sierra Magazine is a bi-monthly magazine with a printed circulation of approximately 650,000 copies. Sierra Club Insider, an electronic newsletter, is sent to nearly 3.5 million people twice a month. In addition, Sierra Club disseminates information obtained by FOIA requests through comments to administrative agencies, and where necessary, through the judicial system<sup>4</sup>

Sierra Club intends to share the information received from this FOIA request with the general public, our impacted members across the country, the media and our allies who share a common interest in the operations of EPA's UIC program and Class VI injection wells. As the injection of co2 into these Class VI wells would likely come from coal plants, Sierra Club has concerns about the potential impacts to water and other natural resources.

Sierra Club unquestionably has the "specialized knowledge" and "ability and intention" to disseminate the information requested in the broad manner outlined above, and to do so in a manner that contributes to the understanding of the "public-at-large."

**4. The disclosure would contribute "significantly" to public understanding of government operations or activities.**

The records requested will contribute to the public understanding of the government's role, or their "operations and activities" associated with EPA's UIC program and Class VI injection well

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Sierra Club sought information about coal export and permitting activities in Oregon via a state public records act request at the Port of Coos Bay. All correspondence is published online and has received extensive media attention from press releases on the subject. See Sierra Club Challenges Dirty and Dangerous Fossil Fuel Exports in Oregon, <http://content.sierraclub.org/environmentallaw/lawsuit/2013/sierra-club-challenges-dirty-and-dangerous-fossil-fuel-exports-oregon>. Sierra Club also recently publicized the results of its FOIA requests regarding agency job freezes, a story that was picked up by the Washington Post. Alexander Rony, *Trump Admin Policy Leaves 700 CDC Jobs Vacant*, The Planet, <http://www.sierraclub.org/planet/2017/05/trump-admin-policies-leave-700-cdc-jobs-vacant>; Lena H. Sun, *Nearly 700 vacancies at CDC because of Trump administration's hiring freeze*, The Washington Post, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2017/05/19/nearly-700-vacancies-at-cdc-because-of-trump-administration-hiring-freeze/?utm\\_term=.6c2e70d8581e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2017/05/19/nearly-700-vacancies-at-cdc-because-of-trump-administration-hiring-freeze/?utm_term=.6c2e70d8581e).

applications. The disclosure of the requested records is essential to the public's understanding of EPA's operations and activities. After disclosure of these records, the public understanding of EPA's activities will be significantly enhanced. The requirement that disclosure must contribute "significantly" to the public understanding is therefore met.

**5. The requester has no commercial interest that would be furthered by the requested disclosure.<sup>5</sup>**

Sierra Club has no commercial interest in the requested records. Nor does it have any intention to use these records in any manner that "furthers a commercial, trade, or profit interest" as those terms are commonly understood. Sierra Club is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization under sections 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) of the Internal Revenue Code, and as such has no commercial interest. The requested records will be used for the furtherance of Sierra Club's mission to inform the public on matters of vital importance to the environment and public health.

Sierra Club respectfully requests that EPA waive processing and copying fees pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A) because the public will be the primary beneficiary of this requested information. In the event that your agency denies a fee waiver,<sup>6</sup> please send a written explanation for the denial. Please do not incur expenses beyond \$250 without first contacting our office for explicit authorization.

Thank you for your cooperation. If you find that this request is unclear in any way please do not hesitate to call me to see if I can clarify the request or otherwise expedite and simplify your efforts to comply.

/s/\_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>5</sup> Because Sierra Club has no commercial interest, the Club also satisfies the final factor for a fee waiver, which compares the magnitude of an identified commercial interest to the public interest in disclosure.

<sup>6</sup> With the award-winning Sierra magazine and its extensive use of blogs to communicate with the public, Sierra Club would also be eligible for a fee waiver as a media requestor. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(ii); 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(c)(1)(iii); *see also* 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(b)(6) (defining "[r]epresentative of the news media"). A representative of the news media is "any person or entity that gathers information of potential interest to a segment of the public, uses its editorial skills to turn the raw materials into a distinct work, and distributes that work to an audience." 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(ii); *see also Elec. Privacy Info. Ctr. v. Dep't of Def.*, 241 F. Supp. 2d 5, 6, 11-15 (D.D.C. 2003) (a "non-profit public interest organization" qualifies as a representative of the news media under FOIA where it publishes books and newsletters on issues of current interest to the public).